



COURSECASTING

The Wave of the Future?

My iPod is practically a new appendage growing from my ears and extending down to a clip on my belt. So as I've been hearing more and more lately about "coursecasting," I thought it only appropriate that I weigh in on what I hope will be a growing research track for us in Ed Tech.

No fewer than five major universities have already begun experimenting with coursecasting. *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post* recently picked up this topic, and there are several blogs that cover the subject. Heck, even the old codger who writes an educational column for my local paper decided to weigh in, deriding coursecasting as "gimmickry."

What is it? In a nutshell, professors record their lectures either on their computer or on an MP3 player, upload the audio files (and possibly slides, pictures, or even video) to a site where students then download the lecture to their own MP3 players. (The most frequently used is Apple's iPod.) The methods of distribution vary, but generally universities are setting up their own secure sites where students must log in to download lectures specific to their schedule (i.e., it's usually not possible to get free lectures from a course you haven't paid for.)

So is it effective, or is it gimmickry? Hard to say, but certainly coursecasting is ripe for the kinds of research we've spent several RW columns discussing this past year.

For example, one of the first questions to consider is how to define the effectiveness of coursecasting. As with much research on educational interventions, the outcomes that one could measure vary. One could look at overall course grades or look at specific test or quiz scores. Or

perhaps a researcher would be most interested in retention—that is, are coursecasts more or less effective as traditional lectures in helping students retain the information presented?

The bigger questions, I think, are going to come in the form of *how* coursecasting is used and the effects that different methods of implementation will have on outcome measures. One obvious change coursecasting can lead to is decreased attendance in lecture halls. If a professor allows for Q&A in his or her lecture, how will coursecasting students participate? (Yes, many lecture courses have small discussion-based classes led by graduate students on other days of the week, but chances for Q&A with the course professor are still invaluable.)

Furthermore, an MP3 player's eyes cannot light up when it suddenly grasps a difficult concept, and it cannot furrow its brow in confusion. Even the most seasoned professors require such cues in determining if information needs to be repeated.

On the other hand, just because students show up for a lecture, it does not necessarily mean they are going to grasp new concepts or even that they are paying attention. Could it be that the student who makes the effort to download and then listen to a coursecast is more invested in absorbing new information and thus learns more than students who only go to lectures? A comparative or quasi-experimental study of such different kinds of students may lead to valuable new information on how coursecasting can be used most effectively.

Universities are introducing creative ways of keeping attendance up, and these methods may have some effect on how much the use of coursecasting contributes to academic achievement.

By Robert Kadel

Robert Kadel is the founder and a general partner of Kadel Research Consulting, LLC, located in Hyde Park, Vermont. His firm focuses on the evaluation of educational programs in technology, school reform, and community involvement. Rob serves as a volunteer columnist for L&L.

For example, at Stanford University, professors are waiting a month before their lectures become available for download. In this case, the coursecasts are available more for review (e.g., prior to a test or for writing a paper) than for the sole purpose of learning the material. If you want to learn it, go to the lecture, then review the coursecast. But listening to the coursecast alone would at best give you a glancing blow at knowing the material and with a 30-day time lag.

One might also wish to know in what subject areas coursecasting will really work. For example, a lecture course in history may lend itself more readily to coursecasting than a course in math. Many history lectures can take the form of narratives and professors' descriptions of events, while most math courses require students to watch professors detail equations and proofs on a screen or white board. Of course, as coursecasting comes to incorporate more video components, this difference will be minimal.

This, too, may be a way to keep attendance rates high. That is, when there are visual aspects to a lecture, keeping them privy to those who attend the actual lecture may be highly effective. Let's call the coursecast of the lecture the "Cliff's Notes" version—it may be enough to get you a passing grade, but it's not going to give you everything you need to know to be successful in the subject.

Finally, perhaps the most obvious gap in our knowledge of the uses of coursecasting is in the realm of K–12 education. Thus far, coursecasting has been limited to higher education, and given the cost of an MP3 player with enough memory to store multiple lectures (from about \$100 to \$400), this is not surprising. Providing such a resource to public schools students certainly doesn't seem like the wisest course of action when there are so many other educational needs seeking our tax dollars. The real question is

whether the use of such devices may be more effective than programs that are currently receiving funding. For example, if new public school libraries were to be stocked with compressed audio and video files for students to "check out" onto their MP3 players (and/or if the players themselves could be borrowed from the library), this may provide a lower cost and lower space requirement than traditional media storehouses. Teachers could then contribute to this library by making their own lectures available in much the same way that we see coursecasting used in major universities. This isn't even the tip of the iceberg—this is an idea still adrift in the water waiting to bump into the ice.

The point of all of this is to say that coursecasting may or may not be the wave of the future—we simply have too many questions left to answer. To dismiss it out of hand simply because it's not the way we are used to doing things is conservative tripe. (I don't mean conservative in the political sense; I just mean it as in the opposite of progressive.)

But to dive into coursecasting with both feet would also be altogether foolish—it is no magic bullet that will suddenly help students to get more out of their courses.

Researchers have a wide variety of questions to answer in this arena. Coursecasting is a tool, like any other form of technology, which can be used wisely or thoughtlessly. And, just as we are learning with so many other new technology-based instructional strategies, it is the application of that tool that makes the difference.

Resources

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